



ECDC Advisory Forum

**Minutes of the Sixty-fifth meeting of the ECDC Advisory Forum  
11 May 2021 (via audio conference)**

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## Opening and adoption of the programme noting declarations of interest

1. Andrea Ammon, Director, ECDC, welcomed participants to the 65<sup>th</sup> Advisory Forum meeting (teleconference).
2. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, welcomed all the participants to the meeting. A special welcome was extended to Isabelle Bonmarin, new alternate France, and Palle Valentiner Branth, Head of the Vaccine-Preventable Diseases Group at Denmark's Statens Serum Institut (SSI), who was participating as an individual expert as neither the AF Member nor Alternate from Denmark were available. Apologies had been received from Belgium, Latvia, Romania, the European Commission and WHO's Regional Office for Europe.
3. Isabelle Bonmarin, AF Alternate, France, requested an additional item for a short discussion on Eurosurveillance if time permitted.
4. The draft programme was adopted.
5. There were no conflicts of interest declared.

## Adoption of the draft minutes from the 64<sup>th</sup> Advisory Forum meeting

6. A request had been received from Portugal for amendments to Points 17 and 44 of the draft minutes from 18 February 2021 and this had been taken into account in the version sent to the AF. There were no other comments and the minutes of the 64<sup>th</sup> meeting were adopted.

## Update on COVID-19

7. Andrea Ammon, Director, ECDC, gave an update on ongoing COVID-19 work mentioning that the main focus was currently on issues related to vaccination and SARS-Cov-2 variants. She said that ECDC was currently preparing a Threat Assessment Brief on the Indian variants (B.1.617 variants) to be published the same day. The main conclusion was that it was now more important than ever to intensify the sequencing in order to detect early the areas where the variants may be spreading in the EU. She informed the Advisory Forum that an extraordinary Management Board meeting had taken place the previous week to discuss the ECDC involvement in the EU Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) Incubator Action Area 1 focusing on the rapid detection of SARS-COV-2 variants. In this context, ECDC has been tasked by the Commission to carry out a number of laboratory capacity building activities with a total budget of EUR 106 M. According to the proposed implementation plan, the work will focus on three main areas: 1) to maintain, and if possible expand, the shorter-term support to EU/EEA countries for access to high-capacity WGS services through an external contractor, 2) an infrastructure support programme to develop and/or enhance national WGS and RT-PCR infrastructure to be implemented through grants based on national applications, and 3) a cross-border capacity-building support programme for training, twinning and WGS and RT-PCR standardisation to be put in place following a call for tender. She then presented briefly the tentative timeline for the infrastructure programme and the impact of the proposed activities on the current ECDC work plan. She stressed that, from the ECDC perspective, the infrastructure support programme was of great public health value as it would help implement the ECDC molecular surveillance roadmap and thereby lift the Member States to a different position in terms of surveillance.

8. Mika Salminen, AF Member, Finland, said that from the Finnish perspective it was important that this key surveillance development would be managed through ECDC. When discussing the activities of the future HERA and the cross-border threats regulation, it was also important that the roles of the various agencies were clear and at present, there was still some overlap in the plans. He believed that the expansion of reference laboratory functions serving preparedness and surveillance should be coordinated by ECDC rather than the new agency (which he saw more as a preparedness, stockpiling and negotiation agency), even if this meant concentrating ECDC activities in a specific area for a length of time.

9. Frode Forland, AF Observer, Norway, was pleased that the issue of the HERA Incubator had been discussed at the Management Board meeting the week before because, to date, this had mainly been discussed with NFPs for Microbiology who were the technical contacts, yet this issue affected the whole country in each case. It was important that the issue was discussed at the appropriate level for decision-making as it involved a great deal of money, things were moving very fast and sequencing was only part of the solution. He queried the difference between equipment purchase, which was ineligible and infrastructure which was eligible for funding and asked about the difference.

10. Fernando Simón Soria, AF Member, Spain said that it was important for ECDC to continue along the present path, and to be involved from the beginning with the inception of HERA. This would ensure that it had some weight in the decision-making on the future shape of the new authority. With regard to the call for proposals, he asked whether this would be on a first-come-first-served basis or how the prioritisation would be decided for different countries. The development of WGS by definition had to involve the development of country capacities. Instead of sending samples to a specific place, he preferred the idea of capacity development at national level.

11. Lorraine Doherty, AF Member, Ireland, pointed out that expanded capacity would in turn put pressure on ECDC to expand surveillance and guidance activities. She asked what exactly would be sequenced and what would happen with the results of the sequencing – i.e. what would ECDC's role be.

12. Andrea Ammon, Director, ECDC, said that the AF Observer for Norway was correct in saying that sequencing was only part of the solution. As mentioned by the AF Member for Ireland, the results of sequencing would need to be processed and converted into risk assessments and action (outbreak investigations, etc.) This fact had also been discussed at the Management Board meeting. Proposals for the infrastructure needed to conceptualise how this would be embedded into the whole public health infectious disease system because improving sequencing on its own would not help. She hoped that a basis could be created for decision making as it was not just about installing new machinery and adding a few bio-informaticians. With regard to the comment on the EU reference laboratories, the proposal was that ECDC should coordinate the laboratories although the nomination process and financing would be arranged by the Commission. In response to the comment by the AF Member for Spain regarding financing, she was aware that EUR 83 million was not a lot for infrastructure, however it was more than the whole annual budget for ECDC. There was also the possibility to add a further EUR 60 million, although it would first be necessary to look through the proposals received. Any country could apply but when prioritising ECDC would have to help those countries that currently did not have the capacity to do the required amount of sequencing.

13. Vicky Lefevre, Head of Unit, Public Health Functions, ECDC, said that this was an amazing opportunity for ECDC. In response to the question about the difference between equipment and infrastructure, the former could include equipment or software for bioinformatics, lymph systems, etc. ECDC was currently negotiating an exception with DG Budget regarding this issue, but was still waiting for their final feedback.

## **Discussion on COVID-19 - Demonstration and discussion of access to the ECDC app for the 'Framework for tuning response measures'**

14. Helen Johnson, Expert Mathematic Modelling, Scientific Methods and Standards Unit, ECDC presented the app and gave a short demonstration. She pointed out that the ECDC modellers were keen to receive feedback on the app and its use on an ongoing basis. The floor was opened for comments.

15. Mika Salminen, AF Member Finland, asked whether the analysis of results and conclusions had undergone any form of external peer review, and asked what the app was actually offering.

16. Helen Johnson said that there had only been an informal peer review, not a scientific one, in that she and her colleagues had been in dialogue with various modeller groups. She hoped that a more formal peer review would be possible at a later date. She explained that the mediating principle was the rate of contact and therefore the result was what would be expected to happen to case rates and

mortality rates. So, what was seen here was what would happen to the epidemiology (effective contact rates between people).

17. Mika Salminen cautioned that countries in Europe had very different geographies and therefore he had serious doubts that the type of contact was the same in all countries. He complimented ECDC on the app but saw it as very ambitious and questioned its reliability.

18. Anders Tegnell, AF Member, Sweden, agreed with the AF Member for Finland, that the app was interesting, but that the countries in Europe were very different and the same measures would not have the same impact everywhere. There would also be changes over time as to how well the measures were followed. In addition, the vaccination programme was also affecting the mortality rate and the number of new cases, as was the case in Sweden. He also made the point that severe cases and mortality were not the same - in Sweden these were two separate groups without much overlap. Therefore, the mortality rate had gone down even while the intensive care admission rate had remained high.

19. Helen Johnson explained that there was not one estimate for all countries on the effect of response measures. The estimate was made for individual countries on the basis of the data available at a hierarchical level. This meant that countries were learning about their own prognosis, that of their neighbours and to a certain extent the other countries in Europe. The period 2020 was split into two and the model also took account of fatigue. One aspect which had not yet been looked at was the way in which behaviour might have changed as a result of vaccination because there was no information available for that as yet. In the model, death had been used as the factor in the tiering system rather than ICU admission rates. This was because admission rates differed significantly across Europe and were not dependent on epidemiology, but more on the public health system. The model allowed for trends in mortality and cases by including the relative risk of a person in a certain age group developing disease compared with a person in another age group.

20. Osama Hamouda, AF Member, Germany, [commenting in Chat] made the point that the main problem with an app of this kind was the political aspect and the fact that the political decision-making placed so much pressure on public health experts.

21. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, said that the potential audiences were scientific technical experts, policymakers and possibly the wider public. He asked whether anyone would have any concerns about the app being made available on a wider basis.

22. Anders Tegnell said that the app was an interesting tool but if it got into the hands of the media or others who did not understand the background, it could create enormous problems.

23. Carlos Matias Dias, AF Member, Portugal, said that at certain times, there was a need for scientific evidence while at other times it might be possible to use this app. However, he pointed out that the scientific aspect was always important for politicians at the technical, regional and national level. In Portugal, a simple matrix was used, plotting the RT value against incidence value. In the beginning there was a fear that this would be misinterpreted, yet it had been adopted by the media, politicians and the public and it was used by all as it now represented a common approach. Something similar could happen with this app. It was also important to remember that this was not the model itself, but an app. He suggested that it should be tested in closed groups with target audiences.

24. Mike Catchpole noted that comments by the AF had indicated that it could be a useful tool for public health institutes but that there was a general concern about opening up to the wider public. He suggested that the question of access could be reviewed at the next discussion on COVID-19 at the special monthly AF meeting on 25 May 2021, with some specific questions for the AF Members to vote on. Until then, the AF Members would be able to work with the system and investigate it further. The background paper would be circulated to give more context, and in the meantime, he encouraged the participants to get accustomed to the app and use it.

25. Helen Johnson noted that the European COVID Forecasting Hub now received 30 regular submissions. She asked the AF Members to propose to their modellers the submission of forecasts and encourage them to join the weekly meeting as this was an excellent opportunity to connect with modellers across Europe.

## Increasing impact, equity and interdisciplinarity of the ECDC Fellowship Programme (EPIET/EUPHEM) - Concept note and high-level roadmap

26. Adam Roth, Head of Fellowship Programme, Public Health Functions Unit, ECDC, gave an update on the status of the ECDC Fellowship Programme. The floor was then opened for discussion.

27. Anders Tegnell, AF Member, Sweden, said the proposals looked good and he liked the variation in professional backgrounds which were needed. This was important, as the COVID-19 pandemic had shown - classical outbreak investigation was not the main focus of activities any more, and a much wider, intra-sectorial approach was now needed. It was disappointing though that it had not been possible to merge the two tracks as he felt they should be integrated.

28. Adam Roth pointed out that this was a work in progress and that it was necessary to systematically update and meet needs as they went along. The two platforms were both well established, and it was therefore possible to work with both to improve strength and interdisciplinarity. There were common aspects between the two paths and the core modules were exactly the same for everyone but then there would be more possibilities for flexibility. The major difference was where the fellows were placed and their background when selected for the programme. It was very important that there were specialisations and one way to ensure this was to keep the paths.

29. Osama Hamouda, AF Member, Germany, noted that discussions had been going on for several years now and the programme was very dear to many of the AF Members. He was therefore very pleased with the intensified communications from ECDC to all stakeholders and was aware that it was difficult to accommodate everyone's wishes.

30. Mike Catchpole said that there seemed to be broad support for the approach presented and he looked forward to seeing the programme going from strength to strength.

31. Adam Roth thanked the AF for their feedback and looked forward to working with them all on the programme.

### Any other business

32. Isabelle Bonmarin, AF Alternate, France, expressed concerns about the capacity at *Eurosurveillance* and suggested that this could put the journal under threat. The time taken to publish was too long and authors were therefore looking for possibilities to publish elsewhere. She asked whether more resources could be made available to reinforce the team.

33. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, pointed out that COVID-19 had placed whole of ECDC under enormous pressure and this had also affected Eurosurveillance.

34. Andrea Ammon, Director, ECDC, said that she was aware of the resource issues in relation to Eurosurveillance but there were also problems in other areas of ECDC and resources had to be shared around to cover all the Agency's needs. The issue was currently under discussion.

35. Mike Catchpole thanked the AF Alternate for France for having raised the concern and hoped that, to some extent, the pressures on the organisation would be relieved as the pressures of COVID-19 begin to decrease.

36. Mika Salminen, AF Member, Finland, made a minor request for ECDC to use TESSy data for its maps on COVID-19 sequencing rather than GSAID to obtain a more realistic view of the situation in Finland.

37. In closing, Mike Catchpole said that he looked forward to seeing as many AF Members as possible at the kick-off session for the Third ECDC Joint Strategy Meeting on 12 May 2021 to discuss topics of strategic importance for ECDC. This year the JSM would be organised over a prolonged period, with a kick-off session, followed by working group sessions during June and July 2021 and a virtual plenary on 30 September 2021. He looked forward to some interesting discussions. The next regular scheduled meeting of the AF was on 29 September 2021 and the next COVID-related AF session would be on 25 May 2021.

38. Andrea Ammon, Director, ECDC, thanked the AF Members for their comments and honest feedback which would be taken into account. She was pleased that the proposal for improvements to the EPIET programme was now acceptable, although she agreed that it was disappointing the two tracks could not be merged. With regard to sequencing support, she confirmed that ECDC would continue to liaise with the various authorities and ensure that the proposals presented had been seen and supported by national coordinators. She looked forward to seeing many of the AF Members at the JSM kick-off session the next day.

## Annex: List of participants

Member State	Representative	Status
Croatia	Sanja Kurečić Filipović	Member
Czech Republic	Jan Kynčl	Member
Czech Republic	Kateřina Fabiánová	Alternate
Denmark	Palle Valentiner Branth	Individual expert
Finland	Mika Salminen	Member
France	Isabelle Bonmarin	Alternate
Germany	Osamah Hamouda	Member
Greece	George Panagiotakopoulos	Alternate
Hungary	Zsuzsanna Molnár	Member
Hungary	Ágnes Hajdu	Alternate
Ireland	Lorraine Doherty	Member
Italy	Silvia Declich	Member
Lithuania	Jurgita Pakalniškienė	Member
Luxembourg	Isabel De La Fuente Garcia	Member
Malta	Tanya Melillo Fenech	Alternate
Poland	Magdalena Rosińska	Alternate
Portugal	Carlos Matias Dias	Member
Slovenia	Marta Grgič Vitek	Alternate
Spain	Fernando Simón Soria	Member
Sweden	Anders Tegnell	Member
	Birgitta Lesko	Alternate
<b>Observers</b>		
Iceland	Thorolfur Gudnason	Member
Norway	Frode Forland	Member
<b>European Commission Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)</b>		
AIDS Action Europe	Aigars Ceplitis	Alternate